

# France: Riots break out in Paris suburbs after police crash kills youth

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Riots have shaken the north Paris suburbs for two consecutive nights after the deaths of two youths, Moushin and Larimi, in Villiers-le-Bel around 5 p.m. on Sunday, November 25. The youths were riding on a motorbike that was hit by a police car and were left for dead by police.

The basic details of the collision are not in dispute. According to the daily *Le Monde*, “the motorbike skidded for over twenty meters,” while “the police car’s front was smashed and the bumpers torn off; the windshield caved in deeply.” The policemen promptly fled the scene on foot.

Marie-Thérèse Givry, the Pontoise district prosecutor, said that the policemen left the area and did not begin investigations until that night because of “the danger that their presence in that area would have posed.” She did not explain her comment further, but it is clear that they feared being caught by enraged inhabitants.

*Le Monde* quoted Younès B., an inhabitant of Villiers-le-Bel: “A second police team came to pick up their colleagues. But they left the two kids without doing anything.”

Givry opened an investigation for “involuntary homicide and non-assistance of persons in danger” with the Inspection Générale de la Police Nationale (IGPN), the national agency charged with investigating police misconduct.

Belgium’s RTL television interviewed one inhabitant who said: “A lady [...] came down to help them, she’s a nurse. She gave them first aid. When the neighborhood kids arrived, she said, ‘It’s over, they’re dead.’ She was all alone, the cops were gone.”

Firemen eventually arrived to try to help the victims. Omar Sehhouli, the brother of one of the deceased, told RTL: “I spoke to a fireman, I won’t tell you the name as he asked me not to quote him. He said, ‘Frankly, just between the two of us, the policemen are cowards.’”

There are substantial suspicions that the incident was deliberate. According to reporters for the daily *Libération*, “Media use of the term ‘involuntary homicide’ was particularly infuriating [to residents of the area], many of whom are convinced that the collision was deliberately provoked by the police squad.”

*Libération* added: “There was apparently tension between one of the victims and police. Larami’s father [...] affirmed today to other inhabitants that a policeman had threatened his son last week. He described a verbal exchange with a policeman who told his son that ‘You’ll have to deal with us.’”

Rioting spread that evening and developed into a pitched battle between police and local inhabitants. Riot police around the local fire station shot flash-balls and tear gas at demonstrators, who threw stones and glass bottles. They then marched on the local commuter train station, burning the police stations of Villiers-le-Bel and Arnouville-lès-Gonesse and destroying their computers.

*Le Monde* commented: “Despite reinforcements from all over the Paris area, police forces—equipped with bulletproof vests, flash-balls, and tear grenades—had the greatest difficulty in restoring order. They tried to block the movements of ‘highly mobile’ groups, according to a police official on the scene, but without success. [...] Numerous inhabitants insulted policemen as they go by—and the police did not hesitate to reply in the same manner.”

According to figures given by Givry’s office, 40 policemen were injured, including one police commissioner with serious skull injuries. No figures were given in French corporate media on the number or seriousness of casualties among the demonstrators.

The next day, hundreds of policemen were brought into the region.

The IGPN released an interim report on Monday that provocatively attempted to whitewash the conduct of the police. It cleared the policemen of all charges and confirmed “police accounts” that the incident was a “traffic accident” due to the youth traveling “at a very lively speed,” whereas the police car was moving “normally, without speeding or sirens.”

On the question of whether police failed to appropriately help the victims of the accident—to which both witnesses and officials had until then unanimously testified—the report brazenly asserted that it was “a harder point in the case,

which calls for more investigations.” It added that police committed “no serious error.”

Authorities quickly tried to rally around the report. Givry announced: “I will not let anyone say that the police services did not assist the youth.” From China, where he is currently on a state visit, French President Sarkozy demanded that “everyone calm down and that the justice system be allowed to determine the degree of responsibility on both sides.”

Villiers-le-Bel inhabitants marched Monday afternoon. Those at the front of the march carried pictures of Moushin and Larimi bitterly labeled, “Rest in peace. Deceased on November 25, 2007. Died for no reason.”

Monday night, further rioting broke out in six neighboring suburbs: Villiers-le-Bel, Cergy, Goussainville, Sarcelles, Garges-lès-Gonesse, and Ermont. Police sources said 36 cars burned, in addition to trashcans, a primary (*maternelle*) school, and a library. Thirty policemen were listed as injured, including two serious injuries. Again, there were no figures on non-police injuries.

Authorities fear that, should these demonstrations continue and get out of control of police forces, there could be a replay of the November 2005 riots touched off by the electrocution of two youths while fleeing police in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois. They are therefore publicly announcing preparations for a massive confrontation.

A police official told *Le Monde*, “It’s been a long time since there have been so many police forces brought together. Even in 2005 we hadn’t seen something like this. The town is entirely sectioned off.”

The use of language reminiscent of French colonialism’s struggle against the masses of Algiers in the 1950s is no accident. The policy of forming large-scale police authorities capable of rapidly mobilizing large numbers of cops for police raids in poor neighborhoods—a policy championed by Sarkozy as Interior Minister in 2003—has helped transform the relations between inhabitants and police into a constant, low-level war that erupts every time the police kill someone, unintentionally or otherwise.

Inhabitants’ suspicions that the deaths were intentional are entirely justified. This act of police violence comes in a definite political context—the calling off by the trade union bureaucracy of the major transport strikes against Sarkozy’s government over pension cuts.

Every time a major mass struggle has been called off in recent years—e.g. in 2003 against then-Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin’s pension cuts and in 2006 against Dominique de Villepin’s First Job Contract reforms—the government has sought to appeal to racist or religious prejudices against Muslims and immigrants, who make up a large portion of the population in poorer suburbs. In 2003, Raffarin prepared a bill that banned Islamic headscarves in

French public buildings. In 2006, the Villepin government passed a tough anti-immigrant bill shortly after the end of the First Job Contract demonstrations.

Whether or not this particular killing happened as authorities were encouraging police officials to take a harder line on immigrant suburban youth is, of course, hard to determine. However, there are undeniable signs that another campaign appealing to anti-immigrant prejudices is being prepared.

Several media outlets, including *Libération* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*, have recently carried articles paraphrasing apparently vulgar anti-Muslim rants by Sarkozy in diplomatic negotiations with other European heads of state.

*Libération* journalist Jean Quatremer wrote on November 19 that Nicolas Sarkozy “gave a real anti-Muslim diatribe before his guests. According to my sources, the head of state [i.e. Sarkozy] launched into a confused, twenty-minute speech [...] against the overly large number of Muslims present in Europe.” He mentioned that Sarkozy repeatedly spoke of a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and Europe.

*Le Nouvel Observateur*, in its November 26 article on the subject, also posted a video of Sarkozy criticizing Islamic practices, such as the slaughter of sheep during the festival of Eid. Sarkozy roughly comments: “One does not slaughter a sheep in one’s bathtub.”

In the current political context, no confidence can be placed in the investigations carried out by the police. Sarkozy’s call for everyone to “calm down” in the face of a police whitewash reeks of the most repellent cynicism. An independent investigation must be convened to establish the legal responsibility of the policemen and the political responsibility of the leading politicians.



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